

May 3, 2006

Editorial

Foolishness on Fuel

Americans can be forgiven for thinking that the outcry over gasoline prices has finally persuaded Congress and President Bush to rethink their opposition to making meaningful improvements in fuel economy standards, largely unchanged for 20 years. Last week Mr. Bush practically begged Congress for the authority to raise these standards; a House committee then urgently scheduled a hearing.

This is mostly theater. Mr. Bush can raise the standards on his own, subject to later Congressional veto. He does not want to do that. What he wants is the authority to change the current system — in effect, to rewrite the underlying fuel economy law.

Under present law, the passenger cars produced each year by an automaker must average 27.5 miles a gallon. Mr. Bush wants to replace that easily understood standard with a more complex system under which vehicles would be divided into categories and assigned mileage standards based on size — but with no firm fleetwide target.

This is essentially what Mr. Bush did earlier this year when he unveiled the first broad overhaul since the 1970's of the mileage rules governing S.U.V.'s, minivans and pickup trucks. The administration says the new system will improve fuel economy for these vehicles by about 8 percent by 2011 — a trivial gain measured against the need, and suspect in any case because the more complex the system, the easier it is to manipulate. Ten states, including New York, filed suit yesterday to force the administration to toughen the standards.

Representative Sherwood Boehlert, a Republican from upstate New York, has suggested a simpler, more transparent approach. While building some flexibility into the system, he would abolish the distinction between S.U.V.'s and ordinary passenger vehicles and require a fleetwide average of 33 miles per gallon. This, he estimates, would save about 2.6 million barrels of oil a day by 2025, nearly a third of the current consumption for cars and light trucks.

If that sounds radically ambitious, consider this bit of history: In 1990, two senators — Slade Gorton, a conservative Republican, and Richard Bryan, a liberal Democrat — proposed raising fuel economy standards to 40 miles a gallon over 10 years. They actually got 57 votes for their proposal, which lost to a filibuster.

Had it passed, we would probably be consuming half the gasoline we use now and be in better shape to deal with today's price squeeze. There's still time to prepare for the next one.